



United Methodist Pastor Faces Trial for Conducting Service of Holy Union

Chicago, Ill. (Feb. 23) A United Methodist pastor threatened with having his ordination removed for conducting a service of Holy Union for two men will go to church trial on Thursday, March 25. The denomination's regional Committee on Investigation today formally charged Rev. Gregory Dell, pastor of the Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago, with "disobedience to the Order and Discipline of the United Methodist Church." The Committee functions similar to a "Grand Jury" for such charges.

The three-day church trial will be held at the First United Methodist Church of Downers Grove, IL, and will be open to the public. The trial will be conducted before a jury of 13 clergy selected from a pool of 36 nominated from the denomination's Northern Illinois region. A majority of nine votes is required for conviction. If Pastor Dell is found guilty, the jury will determine the penalty, ranging from withdrawal of the credentials of ordination to a suspension for some period of time to "a lesser penalty."

"Not only is the decision expected, it is actually welcome," Pastor Dell said in response to the Committee's decision. "The trial will be an occasion for the Church to consider this matter in the context of real ministry with real people.

"It is unfair to the thousands of people on all sides of this controversial issue to continue debating it in the abstract," Dell said. "The love that God offers is not theoretical. The Church must decide if it truly wants to declare that its affirmation of God's embracing, celebrating acceptance is available to some but not others who want to live in faithful relationships of commitment and love."

Clergy persons selected as church and defense counsels will argue the case. Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, in accordance with the denomination's Discipline selected as Church counsel the Rev. Stephen Williams, pastor of First United Methodist Church, Franklin Park, IL. Assistant counsel for the Church is James Geoly, Esq.

Pastor Dell selected as defense counsel the Rev. Dr. Larry Pickens, Esq., pastor of Maple Park United Methodist Church in Chicago. Assistant counsels for Pastor Dell are Theodore M. Swain, Esq. of the law firm Gould and Ratner, and Antonious L.K. Porch, Esq. Presiding over the proceedings

will be Bishop Jack Tuell from the United Methodist Council of Bishops.

Pastor Dell has conducted 33 services of Holy Union for gay and lesbian couples during the past 18 of his 30 years of pastoral service. He has said he "will never stop doing such services as long as I have my ordination." He contends that to refuse such services is to discriminate against the approximately 30% of the congregation that he serves which is gay.

"I took a vow to be in ministry with all persons—not *regardless* of their identity but in *celebration* of their identity," Rev. Dell said. "I'm expected to Baptize, teach, counsel, visit, bury and learn from all of the persons to whom I've been appointed to pastor. I'm also charged to bless and celebrate relationships of love between persons when those relationships uphold standards of faithfulness and ministry. It is a privilege—not a duty—to do so. To withhold such blessing from some because of their identity and regardless of the quality of their relationships would be the true violation of my ordination."

Response to the Trial

Broadway Church and representatives of numerous other United Methodist churches and organizations throughout the Northern Illinois region are organizing various forms of witness in response to the trial and to provide support for people planning to attend the trial. Plans include:

1. Transportation and housing information

Volunteers are coordinating: directions to First United Methodist Church; information about public transportation; suggestions for parking; a schedule for busing people from remote parking areas, if necessary; information about housing available in private homes and hotels in the area.

2. Onsite hospitality

Volunteers will oversee an onsite hospitality room with: refreshments; area restaurant suggestions; a message board; collection of financial contributions to support the defense of Pastor Dell.

3. Daily worship services

Volunteers are developing a worship service that will occur each morning before the trial begins for the day. An additional worship service will be conducted immediately following delivery of the verdict on Saturday, March 27. Pastor Dell is expected to speak at that service.

4. Daily prayer vigil

A prayer vigil will be held each day of the trial while the hearings are in session. Individuals who are interested in participating will commit to one-hour, pre-scheduled timeframes of prayer and reflection.

5. Morning outdoor demonstration of support

Each morning before the trial begins for the day, supporters of Pastor Dell and Broadway Church will organize outside of First United Methodist Church in a non-interactive demonstration of support for justice and inclusion. Similar to Broadway's Circle of Care in November 1998, participants will receive armbands signifying their participation in the demonstration. Broadway encourages all interested churches and organizations to bring signs and banners that affirm love, justice and equality.

6. Community witness events

Representatives from the Evanston, Oak Park and Lakeview communities are being invited to organize special witnesses to occur on Friday, March 26—the night before the verdict. It is anticipated that the witnesses will take the form of candlelight vigils.

7. Worship service ideas for churches unable to attend trial

Supportive churches unable to be present at the trial site can show their support from a distance with candlelight vigils, prayer services and special liturgy that affirms justice and inclusion. A "Liturgy for Justice and Inclusion" will be made available along with samples of the hundreds of letters that have been received in support of the call for inclusiveness within the United Methodist Church.

8. Press Conference

A press conference will be held on Saturday, March 27, at First United Methodist Church immediately after the worship service that will follow the delivery of the verdict.

For More Information

Churches and individuals interested in participating in any of the above activities may access information in the ways listed on the following page:

- *Telephone hotline:* Individuals may call the "Trial Information Hotline" at **1-312-683-5166**. Callers will hear a recorded message detailing the development of activities regarding the trial, and information about who they can contact for more details about a specific area.
- *Internet web page:* Additionally, Broadway's worldwide website at <http://www.brdwymc.org> will be updated regularly and will contain email links to volunteers coordinating each activity area.

Pastor Dell conducted the Holy Union service, which gave rise to the charges, on September 19, 1998. When the event came to the attention of Bishop Sprague, who presides over the denomination's churches in Northern Illinois (the Northern Illinois Annual Conference), the Bishop filed a complaint against Rev. Dell. In writing the complaint the Bishop affirmed his personal agreement with Dell's theological and pastoral position. He took the action "despite my high regard for the Reverend Dell, as a person of integrity, who possesses an enviable record of pastoral faithfulness and

effectiveness. ..."

The trial of Rev. Dell will be the first on the issue of Holy Unions since the denomination declared in August 1998 that the prohibition against conducting such services is binding on all United Methodist clergy. That declaration was made by the Judicial Council, which functions as a "Supreme Court" for the United Methodist Church. The Judicial Council had been asked to rule on the status of legislation passed at the denomination's last national General Conference legislative meeting in 1996.

Members and friends of Broadway United Methodist Church, celebrating Rev. Dell's pastoral faithfulness to all people, have created The Justice Fund for costs associated with a Church complaint of this nature. Those wishing to help can make gifts payable to: Broadway United Methodist Church, with the words *Justice Fund* noted on the memo line. Gifts may be mailed to: Broadway United Methodist Church, 3344 N. Broadway, Chicago, IL 60657-3520.

For more information about Broadway Church, please see its web page at <http://www.brdwymc.org>.

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